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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000760

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: DEATH OF A STUDENT ACTIVIST

CARACAS 00000760 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The killing June 13 of a student activist from the opposition Primero Justicia (PJ) party has become a highly-charged political issue. The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) mayor of the municipality where the death occurred has alleged that his predecessor and political rival, a member of the opposition Podemos party, was involved. The opposition has unified in protest and called on the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GRBV) to conduct an unbiased investigation into the murder. The Ministry of Justice has announced it arrested a suspect but, as of June 17, has refused to divulge the name. End Summary.

THE CASE

¶2. (SBU) 31-year-old PJ student activist, Jonathan Rivas, was shot and killed June 13 in front of the tiny rural Tigre municipality's police station in Anzoategui State, quickly generating front-page news coverage. Earlier in the day, Rivas had been involved in an opposition display of support for the Globovision media outlet. After three of his fellow protesters were arrested for spraying graffiti, he went with a crowd to the Tigre police station to call for their release. Counter-protesters soon arrived and a melee broke out between the groups. Around 5pm, shots were fired from an unknown assailant that resulted in the death of Rivas and the injury of another protester.

¶3. (SBU) The current Chavista mayor of Tigre, Carlos Hernandez, told state-owned Venezolana TV (VTV)'s "Dando y Dando" broadcast that the fatal shots had been fired from a car allegedly belonging to his predecessor, Ernesto Paraqueima, who is the secretary general of Podemos (a small leftist party that broke from its earlier coalition with Chavez) for Anzoategui State. Minister of Justice Tarek El Aissami contended June 15 that the author of the murder was "plainly known" and said that the state was gathering the evidence required to issue an arrest warrant. He asserted that "with these results we want to demonstrate to the country the swiftness and responsibility with which we have acted and the disposition of the Bolivarian government to attend to any violent act." On June 16, police raided former mayor Paraqueima's house but did not find any criminal evidence, according to the family's lawyer. Local press announced the same day that police had arrested a murder suspect, but refused to release the name.

¶4. (SBU) According to the PSUV Governor of Anzoategui, Tarek Saab, the opposition protesters had also been trying to liberate Paraqueima's father from the police station -- who had also been arrested during the opposition protest -- and started throwing rocks and bottles. Local press indicate that Paraqueima himself suffered a head injury during the confrontation, and his lawyer blamed the Tigre municipal police for allowing the violence to continue "under their protection" for upwards of 45 minutes.

OPPOSITION CALLS FOR JUSTICE

¶5. (SBU) All the opposition heavyweights gathered in front of the Public Ministry in Caracas on June 15 to call for an "impartial investigation" of the murder, including Ismael Garcia (Podemos), Henry Ramos Allup (Accion Democratica), Luis Ignacio Planas (Copei), Tomas Guanipa (PJ), and Omar Barboza (Un Nuevo Tiempo). Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma was also in attendance. They denounced the GBRV's "campaign of harassment" against opposition political parties and opposition governance, and the obfuscation of the Rivas case. PJ representatives called for a nationwide protest in front of state public ministries.

¶6. (SBU) PJ president Julio Borges told the press that he wanted justice for Rivas, as well as for Zulia student activist Flavia Araujo who died in 2007. He also added Miranda State AN Deputy Alberto Crisafi, who died as a result of criminal violence in 2008, to the list. PJ spokeswoman Alicia Figueroa added that "we are tired that each time there is an injury or death among people who protest for democracy...the government says that we are the ones who provoked it."

CARACAS 00000760 002.3 OF 002

¶7. (SBU) In his initial statement to the press, Governor Saab had related that Rivas's mother had contacted to ask that her son's name not be used for "political ends," and then emphasized that Rivas was a student -- rather than opposition -- activist. Later that day, Figueroa countered Governor Saab's assertions that Rivas had quit PJ, contending that he was a youth member of PJ and a founder of the party's branch in Tigre. Borges appeared on Venevision June 16 and echoed Figueroa that Rivas was "a founder of the party" but said that "whether he was or wasn't a (party) militant, we're talking about seeing justice done."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Lamentably, student deaths in Venezuela are not unheard of but this incident has generated an unusual amount of press and political attention. The Minister of Justice went on TV within 48 hours and the opposition has shown unity in reacting to Rivas's death. Student leaders occupy a uniquely esteemed position among Venezuelans all along the political spectrum, and the death of an activist during an anti-government protest could prove symbolic for other youth leaders and their families, who have expressed mounting concern to us about the possibility of pacific protests escalating into fatal violence. Until the GBRV moves forward with releasing the suspect's name and other details of the investigation, it is unclear whether this will remain a rallying point for the opposition or be overshadowed by other news events. End Comment.

CAULFIELD